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SUBJECT: USER CREATED CONTENT (UCC) - THE NEXT BIG
POLITICAL TOOL?

11. Summary. User-created content (UCC), digital information produced and posted by Internet users, is poised to play a major role in Korea's upcoming presidential election. Candidates are jockeying for prime Internet channels from which to project carefully crafted images to mass audiences, and are cultivating full-time media personas to guard against well-publicized missteps. That election players are taking UCC seriously this election is evidenced by the struggle of law enforcement and regulatory agencies to define the parameters of UCC use in campaigns. End Summary.

12. Online digital information created by Internet users, dubbed user-created content (UCC), is expected to factor heavily in Korea's upcoming presidential elections. Widespread availability and use of digital equipment, combined with increasing reliance on Internet-based sources for news, has spawned a new "Internet populism." Many of Korea's estimated 33.58 million Internet users increasingly turn to Internet TV - available on phones, TVs, subways and computers - for mainstream news. The gap between average TV and Internet use per day (2 hours, 12 minutes for TV; 1 hour, 44 minutes for Internet) is narrowing, and Korean viewership of primetime news is declining.

13. Companies like Pandora TV, the most popular video-streaming UCC site in Korea, are jockeying for pieces of the election's virtual real estate. Dubbed Korea's YouTube, Pandora TV recently auctioned Internet video channels to candidates anxious to launch virtual campaigns in the run-up to the 2007 elections. Presidential candidate Chung Dong-young of the ruling Uri party beat out four other candidates to land exclusive rights to the much-coveted channel 2007. The Blue House took 1219 (the date of the election) in 2006 so no candidate could have this channel. The portal's large audience - two million paying subscribers and approximately 3.3 million daily viewers - and ability to track what subscribers watch by age, gender, and region, render it a fertile platform for next-generation campaigning.

14. Presidential candidates, hoping to capitalize on UCC's popularity, are launching their own video channels and hiring web consultants to project desirable images. Richard Hwang, responsible for the portal's political content, told poloff all 14 presidential hopefuls have approached Pandora TV about using its technology as a campaign tool. In addition, each of the GNP's "Big Three" presidential hopefuls - Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Sohn Hak-kyu - has posted UCC clips on their personal homepage. Park Geun-hye's homepage, for example, features a graceful video clip of her playing

piano entitled "Piano Playing Princess Geun-hye."

¶15. Because of the UCC's broad audience and accessibility, postings can also damage a candidate's chances. "All it takes is one video to create political momentum - good or bad," Pandora TV's CFO Mike Hong told poloff. Offhand comments or acts caught by netizens with cell phones and a small degree of technological savvy can balloon into well-publicized gaffes with the potential to derail the best-planned campaign. In the runup to the 2004 National Assembly, then Uri Party chairman Chung Dong-young suffered a serious set-back that still affects him today when his disparaging remark about senior citizens was caught in digital form and posted online by a netizen. The widely-viewed blunder created a public uproar and led to Chung's resignation.

¶16. With UCC-based campaigning emerging as a key variable in the upcoming election, regulatory and law enforcement agencies are struggling to define the parameters of acceptable UCC use. The National Election Commission's vacillating UCC guidelines reflect the difficulty in regulating this new, largely unfettered media, and serve as tacit acknowledgement of the UCC's potential power this election year. The Commission announced broad guidelines prohibiting voters from creating election-related UCC before the official campaign period - which begins 23 days before the December 19 election - and reversed course three weeks later following a barrage of criticism from Internet users concerned that too much regulation could drive away younger voters.

¶17. The Seoul Central Prosecutors' Office announced on February 21 plans to establish a "UCC Monitoring Office" and "Digital Investigation Team," consisting of 20 prosecutors and investigators, to police online campaign abuses. The Korean National Police Agency already monitors illicit UCC campaign activities through its Cyber Counter-Terrorism Center.

Comment

¶18. In 2002, the presidential elections were affected by instant messaging and the internet, and 2007 will likely see UCC take a prominent position in the campaign. Just 20 years after democratization, Korea now is at the cutting edge of democracy, developing new ways for more people to participate in the political process.
VERSHBOW